

Essay XXXVI.

OF AMBITION

By

Sir Francis Bacon

Introduction

In his essay “**Of Ambition,**” Sir Francis Bacon explores the nature, effects, and management of ambition in human life and governance. Bacon compares ambition to *cholera*, a bodily humour that makes people active and energetic if kept in control, but dangerous if suppressed. Through his balanced and practical observation, Bacon examines both the usefulness and the risks of ambitious individuals, especially in political and administrative affairs. He suggests that while ambition can drive men to great achievements, it can also make them rebellious or harmful if not wisely guided. This essay reflects Bacon’s deep understanding of human character and political prudence, showing his mastery in blending moral philosophy with practical wisdom.

Essay: *Of Ambition*

Ambition is like cholera, which is a bodily humour that makes people active, eager, and full of energy when it flows freely. But if it is stopped and cannot have its way, it becomes dry, angry, and poisonous. In the same way, **ambitious men, when they find an open path for their rise and keep moving forward, are busy but not dangerous. But if their progress is blocked, they become secretly unhappy and begin to look at people and events with jealousy and ill will.** They feel pleased when things go wrong. This is the worst quality in a servant of a king or a state.

Therefore, **it is good for rulers, if they must use ambitious men, to manage them so that they keep progressing** and not moving backward. But since this is hard to do without problems, it is generally better **not to use such people at all.** For if they cannot rise through their service, they will try to make their service fall with them.

Still, sometimes ambitious men must be used out of necessity. **Good commanders in war** must be accepted, however ambitious they may be, because their ability makes their ambition useful. **To employ a soldier without ambition is like taking off his spurs—it removes his courage and drive.** Ambitious men are also useful as screens to princes, taking the blame or danger in difficult or unpopular matters. Such men are like a blinded dove that flies upward and upward because it cannot see around itself.

Ambitious men can also be used to **pull down the power of another person who has become too great**, just as **Tiberius used Macro** to destroy **Sejanus**. Since such men are sometimes necessary, the next thing is to know **how to control them so that they are less dangerous**. They are less harmful if they are **of low birth** than if they are noble, and if they are **rough in nature** rather than charming and popular. They are also less dangerous if they are **newly risen** rather than already well-established and strong in their greatness. Some think it is a weakness for princes to have favourites, but in fact, it is **the best remedy against ambitious great men**, because when the power to please or displease lies with a favourite, no other man can become too powerful.

Another way to restrain ambitious men is to **balance them by others who are equally proud**, but there must also be **middle counsellors** to keep matters steady; otherwise, the state will be unstable, like a ship without proper balance. At least, a prince may train and encourage some lesser men to act as **whips or checks** upon the ambitious.

If such men are **fearful by nature**, making them feel insecure or in danger of ruin may help to control them. But if they are **bold and daring**, it may only make them act rashly and become more dangerous. When there is a need to bring them down, and it cannot safely be done all at once, the best way is to **alternate favours and disgraces**, so that they never know what to expect and remain in confusion, like men lost in a forest.

Among types of ambition, it is **less harmful to desire success in great matters** than to wish to **appear important in every small thing**, because the latter causes confusion and ruins business. Yet it is also less dangerous to have an ambitious man **active in work** than one **who builds too many personal dependences or followers**. The man who wants to be **eminent among able men** has a hard task, but his effort benefits the public. However, the man who wishes to be **the only figure among weak or useless people** is the ruin of an entire age.

Honour has three things in it: the advantage of being able to do good, the closeness to kings and powerful persons, and the improvement of one's own fortune. The man whose ambition aims mainly at the first of these—that is, to do good—is an honest man. And the ruler who can recognise these different kinds of ambition in others is a wise ruler. In general, kings and states should choose servants **who feel more sense of duty than desire of rising, and who love their work from conscience, not from pride.** They must also learn to **tell the difference between a man who is simply busy and one who is truly willing and sincere.**

Conclusion

Dr. T. S. Brahmbhatt observes that Bacon's essay "*Of Ambition*" offers timeless insight into human ambition—its power to inspire progress as well as its potential to cause downfall. Bacon does not condemn ambition outright; rather, he urges moderation and wise handling of ambitious people, especially by rulers. He acknowledges that ambition, when rightly directed, leads to greatness and public good, but when uncontrolled, it brings envy, unrest, and ruin. Thus, Bacon's view is not moralistic but deeply realistic—he teaches that ambition should be guided, not crushed, for it is one of the driving forces behind human advancement.
